----------***February***----------

Intro

In a cap and gown, He stood proud, A fully grown man. Well kept, well liked. His father beamed with pride and his mother was soaked in tears of joy, Jack has finally graduated. After years of exams, long study sessions well into the night and shitty odd jobs. He made it. Soon he will begin his journey into the real world, but before he can his father has one last thing to say to him before Jack is off to start a new life.

"Son, I know I've haven't attentive father. It's difficult to figure out what's the right and wrong choices when it comes to being a parent. I never got along with my father, and I'm sorry for not being there for you in some awful times. I should have known, I should have learned from my Dad, but I didn't. I'm sorry. I'm not good with emotional things son, but whatever you do next I'll be there for you if you need me. But promise me one thing son... If you ever become a father yourself, break the cycle. Show your kids how much you love them, take their problems seriously and always support them. I and also think....."

The conversation began to fade away the world along with it, Jack instead found himself standing at the front door of his apartment, an angry women at his doorstep with a stroller. Inside there were two tiny babies, a boy and a girl, the two of them almost perfectly match Jack's own features. The same cool pale skin, the same coal black hair, the same deep brown eyes. Their peaceful expressions contrast their mother, who stares daggers at the man before her. *"Let me me guess, hangover?"* she angrily says to him. *"W-what?"* he manages to choke out barley awake. *"Oh so I'm right, JUST GREAT."* she spits out. *"Have a whittle headache do we? Well I've had TWO headaches for the past three months and I'm just SICK OF IT, SICK, SICK, SICK OF IT"* She hurriedly wheeled the stroller into the living room past jack with no resistance from him and she hurled a box of diapers at Jack as she walked out the door. *"They're your headache now Jack, good luck, you worthless sack of shit"* as she slammed her car door shut and drove off the world began to fade again. In the blink of an eye a familiar car barreled past him at breakneck speeds. In seconds the vehicle collided with something and a deafening load crash jolted him awake.

As his heart slammed against his chest, Jack found himself in bed. He looked at his clock and when he realized it's 2pm he slowly drew himself out of bed and into the living room. As he came out he was greeted by Amy and Micheal who simply stared at him while they stood in front of something. He looked around the room suspiciously when he noticed their poor attempt at trying to not look guilty. He looked behind them and their faces went pale. Behind the two siblings, broken and on the floor is the graduation gift his dad gave him, A beautiful glass Dragon statue now in pieces all over the floor. As he sat and stared the broken gift his blood boiled, he wanted to yell, he wanted to scream. But in the back of his mind three words started to repeat over and over. "Break the cycle, Break the cycle, Break the cyc-" Instead of yelling, instead of screaming he found another emotion he hadn't expected. As he remembered his father's words, he started to cry instead. Memories of his father began to flood in and the dam finally broke, the torrent of tears just flowed out and the kids fell over themselves apologizing. He turned his face to the two and sighed "*Look, it's*

okay, you made mistake, these things happen, I..I just need a second" after taking in a deep breath he walked over to the two knelt down and held them close into a hug. He began to weep and with tears in his eyes he told them *"I'm not mad okay, I love you, I really do.".* After awhile had passed he prepared lunch and sat with them by TV, watching the cartoons they obsess over, as they continued the habit of a typical lazy weekend lunch.

A loving family

February 14th, As Jack is driving home from a late shift, the people on the radio drone on and on about Valentine's Day. As he heard them go into detail about their plans for valentines day, he saw his on and off again girlfriend since high school, Maria. Did Maria actually want nothing to do the kids? Did she want to see them? Did she regret how things turned out? A barrage of questions flooded Jack as he contemplated whether trying to get back with Maria would even be a good idea. He thought maybe if he just made up with her, the kids could have a mom and dad, but how well would that realistically work out after seven years? But a thought occurred to him. Why did not having a wife or girlfriend mean he was unloved? After all once he got home he would have two people who would parade to the door to see him the minute he came in. Wasn't that love? He loved them too, he thought with a smile. He kicked his alcoholism for them, he stopped going to clubs and parties and meeting with randoms their sake, he got a new job, he saved up to buy Amy clip on earrings, he learned to fix bikes for Michael, and every time they had homework he sat with them at the dining room table helping them with anything they didn't understand. Jack stopped at the store before going home, he loaded up on Michael and Amy's favorite snacks. He was loved, and he had people that he loved.

The "Matryoshka"

On one typical weekend Jack found himself with something he often didn't stop to appreciate enough, free time. Between the kids and work he was usually pretty busy with something. But that day Jack was off from work, and the kids were enjoying their weekend. Having nothing to do he grabbed some chips from the kitchen and lazed around watching TV. Minutes passed by and as the hour advanced the spell the TV had him under was broken by a commercial break. But before he could get up he was distracted by the glow and noise of a tablet the next to him. Holding the device was Amy, she sat right next to her father with the tablet on her lap. She was glued to the video that was playing from it and she stuffed her face with her favorite pretzels. "How long had Amy been sitting there?" He puzzled while he stood up. He stood there for a second and just watched Amy as she was locked in total tranquility by the device. He went upstairs to the kid's bedroom and found that Michael was hypnotized by his favorite video game. While he watched Micheal enjoy his game, Jack thought about how many times he'd been absolutely transfixed on something just like he was with the TV a few minutes ago. Picturing the two kid's current activities in his mind he unintentionally placed himself in their shoes. He suddenly saw himself at Micheal's age, unintentionally Ignoring his mother summons, just as obsessed with his game as his son, and when he thought about his daughter he saw his current self and her sitting together, moving together, everything at the same time, A perfect mirror. The parallels had him stuck in his thoughts for a while before he was able to snap out of it. Jack went downstairs and sat back on

the couch. He wrapped his arm around Amy as he turned the TV back on and let out a sigh. Although disappointed with their behavior, he realized If the two really did mirror him maybe he was the one that needed to change. But change doesn't happen overnight he reasoned. Jack and Amy sat on the couch and comfortably spent time together in their own odd and unconventional way. Disconnected, yet still together.

Relapse.

Addiction starts as a choice and develops into an Illness that removes choice. It seeps its roots into every victim and may never truly lets go.

After an average day at school Michael and Amy sat at the school parking lot waiting for Jack. But the usual short wait was unusually long. As the kids grew anxious a somewhat a familiar car pulled up. Rolling down the window and calling their names is a black man, he has well kept hair, a goatee and a typical white collar office job getup. It's Marcus they realize, one of Jack's two closest friends. They hopped in his car and gave each other a concerned look. *"Did you have a good day at school guys?"* Marcus said trying to break the silence. But they didn't respond. "*He's good, just a little sick right now"* he tried to assure them. *"I'm gonna stop for something to eat really quick before I take you home, you two hungry? I could get you something"*, Marcus asked. They didn't really react but Amy managed to squeak out a quiet but sad *"okay"*. They headed off to the local burger place, Marcus ordered some food and Michael and Amy sat quietly and are during the ride home unresponsive to Marcus' attempts to ease their worries.

As they pulled into the driveway they were greeted by Jason, A tall stocky white man whose tattoos and buzz-cut and make him look more like a convict then a companion. Jack's other closest friend. *"Just wait here for a second"* Marcus said as he turned off the car and walked into the house. He opened the door, walked into the bedroom, and picked up Jack. He got Jack on his feet and up off the floor, then cleared the empty bottles around that littered the room. Meanwhile outside Jason did his best goofy dad's friend routine to distract the kids, but even his best efforts it didn't seem to help them. The kids walked past him and into the house anyway. Something about the whole situation doesn't sit right with them and Jason gave up trying to delay the inevitable. The atmosphere the of the house was heavy and even at their young age they could see Jason's real expression. Stress, fear, sadness. The gig was up, Marcus couldn't guide Jack to the bathroom carefully enough to avoid their anxious eyes and Jason couldn't keep the facade of tranquility any longer. An awkward silence enveloped the room that was quickly broken by gagging and retching. A few agonizing minutes later he finally emerged, Jack. He could barely walk properly as Marcus guided him to the couch. Michael couldn't stand the sight and ran up to his room as he wiped his watery eyes. Amy couldn't move, she could only watch the two friends try to help Jack. His words were slurred but he managed to get out *"Amy, don't look baby" s*he didn't budge. She grabbed her father's hand and looked him directly in the face, unable to think of anything to say to him. He looked at her hand not registering what it was, but looked at her pained face. *"Sorry, sorry, sorry"* he slowly repeated in his slurred voice. He started to cry and pulled her into his lap, he kept apologizing to her and gently stroked her hair. She only shushed him and tried to reassure him as much a child could

realistically do. *“Looks like it’s gonna will take awhile for him to get back up”* Jason sighed. *“Yeah, I think I should take em in for the night”* said Marcus. *“I’ll bring them home in the morning, just sleep it off. Call Jason if something comes up, alright Jack?”.* Marcus asked him. *“yeah”* jack softly replied. Amy and Michel spent the night with Marcus and his family. Jason stayed awhile and left when he was sure things were calming down. After five solid years since the last incident, Jack till that day had managed to keep drinking to a healthy moderation and sometimes he didn’t even drink at all. That day however addiction won and Jack spent the night alone. His only comfort was knowing that Micheal and Amy would be okay for the night.

Stupefaction

Assumptions about life stand on foundations about as solid as a bowl of oil and established rules often times rely on these exact assumptions.

One weekend Amy and Micheal had been assigned a school project to do over the weekend. While Jack had promised the day before to help the two in the morning, Amy woke up unusually early that day. She didn’t feel like going back to sleep so she took out some toys to play with. But her fun accidentally woke up Micheal. Being that the room was shared that wasn’t too uncommon of an occurrence. *“Sorry mike”* she whispered to him. But he was already getting out of bed. Michel simply waved to his sister and she followed him to the kitchen to eat some breakfast. As they were stuffing their face with cereal Michael told Amy *“We should just do the project early so we can play video games the whole day, sound good?”* he asked her “*Shouldn’t we wait for dad though?”* She replied. *“It will be awhile till he wakes up, plus it looks easy”*. He had her convinced, so they started their project. As they were looking for supplies for the project, Michael couldn’t find his usual scissors, so he grabbed a large pair from the kitchen drawer. All went well with the project until they had to cut things out. So when it came time for Micheal to use the scissors he accidentally cut his finger. Michael yelped in pain realizing his mistake. Amy rushed to get him a paper towel to wipe the blood away. Then she lead him to the bathroom. *“I know what do to mike!”* She proudly told her brother. She held his hand over the sink and carefully poured a tiny cap of peroxide on his cut, he winced as it hit his cut and she carefully put a bandaid over his finger. They then decided to wait for Jack to wake up and they played in their room while they waited. Jack wasn’t thrilled to see Michael’s finger and scolded the pair for using the huge scissors. But after looking at Micheal’s finger he was surprised to see the bandaid was put on pretty normally. Usually when an accident happened they would run to him in a panic. *“Who put the bandaid on your finger?”* He asked his son. *“Amy”* he told him. *“I used the brown bottle stuff on it”* she added. He smiled at Amy and praised her for helping Micheal. A happy family moment was then broken up by an aggressive knock at the door.

Jack went to answer the door and they watched him talk to mean looking women. They couldn’t hear what she was saying but she was definitely not happy to see Jack. She slapped a piece of paper in his hands and after a few words she left. Jack’s expression after the encounter changed and they saw him look exactly as hostile as the stranger at the door. He crushed the paper in his hands and he hurled into the trash. He kicked the trash bin over and over until it landed on it’s side, dumping everything out as he screamed in frustration. He stormed off to his

room quickly making a phone call. The kids were frozen, they looked around the scene repeatedly and then at each other, almost as if daring each other to move. Michael carefully made his way over to the bin and took it out the paper he saw Jack crush up. Together they tried to figure out what its contents meant. There was a lot of words they didn't understand but one sentence was underlined, *"due to these reasons my client Maria (last name) is requesting partial custody of Micheal and Amy."* Micheal read out loud. *"What does Cuss-toe-dee mean, mike?"* Amy asked. *"I don't know, but remember the news last week? they said they had a suspected MURDERER in custody!"* He replied. *"She's going to arrest us?"* Amy squeaked. *"She can't, we didn't do anything."* He assured her. *"But who is Maria?"* Amy inquired. "*I don't know, we could ask dad."* He suggested. *"What if he gets mad at us?"* she replied. *"I'll tell em it was my idea, come on."* they made their way to Jack's room and while from outside the room he still looked angry, his face softened as he saw them. *"Who is Maria?"* Micheal asked *"why does she want to arrest us"* Amy added. The kids began to interrogate Jack but with an exhausted sigh and hush he ended the sudden barrage of questions. *"Maria"* Jack said. *"well Maria is… she's you mother."*

----------March----------

Maria

Bumper to bumper, stuck in cesspit of cars and concrete, Maria had plenty of time to think about her situation. Seven years, four months and six days. The number Maria repeated in her mind. Seven years four months and six days since Maria has seen her kids. *"they are mine, I birthed them, I should get to at least fucking see them sometimes"* she thought out loud. Maria ran through all the possible things to say in court that day while sitting and waiting for the impossibly long light to change. How would the kids react to seeing her? Would they like her? Did jack tell them lies about her? Did they hate her? Her thoughts turned a long commute to the courthouse into being at the steps in an instant. She turned cold with nerves as she entered. Her lawyer met up with her, gave her a hello, but he had a zipper on his mouth that offered her no comforting words during the walk into the courtroom. She saw jack and the kids walk in a little while after her. They sat down at the bench and the Jack shushed the kids as more people started to walk in, he whispered something to them that Maria couldn't make out and the kids giggled as quietly as they could. She could see Jack murmuring quietly to his lawyer and the lawyer gave him a nod in response. Were they talking about her? She worried. Her anxiety about the hearing continued to grow but soon it began. Although she had carefully planned exactly what to say the punches kept coming. Maria couldn't combat the questions she was asked and her lawyer was about as useful as a broken clock. When the kids were asked if they remember the last time they saw Maria they couldn't figure out a response. When Maria was asked how many times she had contacted the kids within the past few years she had no answer. She couldn't produce evidence of any involvement in their lives and couldn't list a single thing she knew about Amy and Micheal when she was asked about them. Jack, Amy and Micheal all had the same short list of things to say about Maria's involvement in the kid's lives, and before she knew it the whole ordeal was over. She walked out of the courtroom completely empty handed. She has been granted nothing, not even the bare minimum. But as she walked out she saw Amy and Micheal sitting just

the two of them. *“Micheal, Amy!”* She said sweetly as she went to try to hug Micheal, but he recoiled. *“It’s okay I’m not a stranger baby, I’m your mommy, you don’t need to….”* She was cutoff by Amy. *“why do you want to take us away from dad?”* Maria stopped mid sentence. She couldn’t find a good answer, so she stopped. But just when she could finally think of something to say to them the kids had already started walking off towards Jack. Maria started to walk out of the courthouse but saw one last thing before she left. *“Sorry you had to sit trough that boring courtroom guys, we can get Ice cream though, since you were good”* the kids cheered and started bouncing to the exit. Jack laughed and playfully chased after them, passing Maria as if she didn’t even exist.

Maria then found herself in her car unwilling to do anything, palm over her face, she couldn’t help but cry. Neither of the kids wanted anything to do with her. She had made herself a stranger to them and the time to turn back had long since passed. Thoughts about her situation continued to fester but she was suddenly jolted back to reality by her phone ringing. *“Hello?”* she meekly asked. *“Well Maria, do I get to see them?”* A woman’s voice returned. *“No, I lost the case, I didn’t get anything.” S*he responded. *“I told you it was a stupid idea”* the voice replied. *“We could have spent so many wonderful holidays with our grand kids and you fucked that up for us.”* A man’s voice added in the background of call. *“SEVEN years Maria, and not one of them did you think to tell us you had KIDS?. You may not have wanted to be involved with them but we did!” T*he woman continued. The man spoke again *“And with Jack too? That lowlife alcoholic punk? How was that loser better at handing them then you?”.* The two of them continued to berate Maria and they poked and prodded at her. *“GO... FUCK... YOURSELF”* Maria angrily threw back at them. *“Why don’t you two go fucking ask him yourself?”* She hissed at them before hanging up. As she drove home Maria stewed in her regrets, bothered by the day’s events. Everything about her life felt like a cruel taunt making fun of her loneliness. She entered her house and it’s graveyard silence tormented her. She sat on the couch, microwave dinner in hand, as she watched TV and went over the day’s events again and again. She pictured Micheal and Amy in her arms at the hospital and remembered their first night together. Remembering their little faces made her cry as the regret grew stronger. Was that the only chance she’d ever get to be a mother? Was it truly an unsalvageable relationship? Would Jack ever let her see the kids after what she did that day? Did they hate her cause of it? She didn’t know, and she feared that maybe she’d never know.

Fish out of water.

A little than less seven years before Maria and Jack’s custody battle. Maria had unknowingly already lost. The day Maria dropped the kids on Jack and never looked back was the day that started a long series of events that would seemingly forever taint any chances she had of having a relationship with Amy and Michael. The day the kids went to Jack was day where a young woman had grown tired of dealing with two babies by herself. Instead of facing the music from her parents who hated Jack with a burning passion and asking them for help, Maria instead had hidden her new children from her parents. She had given birth alone with no announcement other than to her close friends. She had tried repeatedly to make it work for three months, but with no support from family, a lack of sleep and rising costs, the stress was too much. It made Maria

think of how easy Jack had it compared to her, he was their father after all, he should be responsible for them too she thought. That day Maria had decided that Jack needed to do his part too. She drove the kids over to his house, let him have three months of pent up rage and left them in his care. At first she'd planned to just give herself a break for a week or two and then she would come back. But it wasn't meant to be to be. Two weeks quickly turned into two months and two months turned into two years, time passed and determined her life's path for the next few years. One that at the time put a great weight off her shoulders, but took her off the path she'd want years later.

That path Maria had given committed to giving up, was picked up by Jack instead. Confused and hungover that day, Jack did the only thing he could think of, he told his mother. Although childcare was rocket science to him, he couldn't bring himself to send the two elsewhere. Even though he hated the idea of being a parent he hated the idea of having to talk to Maria or send them into the system even more. His mother showed up with his aunt and after a few weeks of them helping out Jack, he was able to find his footing. They taught him anything he needed to know to take care of the kids. But even after they took the training wheels off him he was able to manage by himself. But his mother still took every opportunity she could to see her first grand kids.

It was no easy feat for Jack and he was forced to change his lifestyle in the only a few short years, but he had the support and patience that Maria didn't. He had done everything he could for the kids. Because of his effort and his choice that day, Micheal and Amy adored their father. But because of Maria's choices, Micheal and Amy had no relationship with, and knew nothing about her. Maria chose not tell her parents, she chose not return to Jack's house, and she chose to not contact or play any part in the kid's lives. She had chosen to make herself a stranger.

Micheal vs Jane.

One weekend Micheal found himself a battle of upmost importance, the dart gun war. This was serious business, as winning the dart war was badge of honor in the neighborhood. More respect, better trades, and many other perks went to the King of Dart. Micheal was no newbie, he'd never won, but had always survived way longer then most. Early in the morning he stuffed his face at breakfast, grabbed his weapon and sped off. He had studied the neighborhood carefully all week and already knew the best places to catch the other kids off guard. This time he knew, he'd win for sure. As he took position Micheal carefully snuck behind some bushes that allowed him to watch the others pass him by. Quickly and quietly he manged to get two out in only the first few seconds. *"TWO OUT!"* the scorekeeper yelled. Michel booked it it behind one of the neighbor kid's fences and managed to get another three out without being noticed. *"THREE OUT!"*. But all the sudden he started hearing all sorts of commotion by the street *"FOUR OUT!"* the kids in the street wined and groaned at their defeat. Someone good was near so Micheal decided to change positions again. One of the neighbors had trampoline in their yard that the mom would usually keep open for the neighborhood kids to play on. So Micheal snuck past the fence into the yard and onto the trampoline, as he laid prone patiently waiting to ambush the next person that came through the gate. He heard hollering from past the fence's cover. *"TWO OUT!".* As he added up the numbers Micheal realized he

was in bad predicament. Eleven kids out meant the Micheal was about to face the same person who won every time. He looked around carefully not daring to breathe too loud as he listened closely. But soon he realized he couldn't even hear any footsteps. *"GAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH."* A girl started suddenly screaming and jumped on the trampoline right next to Micheal catching him completely off guard, the bounce sent Micheal flying, scaring him nearly to death. As he careened into the air the girl quickly grabbed his hand and stopped him from bouncing too high. As they bounced together the evil smile plastered on her face taunted him. *"Well hello little mikey..... got cha"* she laughed and blasted Micheal with a foam bullet from hell.

It was Jane, he realized. Of all the neighborhood kids Jane was the oldest, even among the older kids. While most of the kids where between seven and eleven Jane was thirteen, she was usually very sweet but when it came to darts she was a ruthless Assassin. *"GAME OVER"* she shouted as she giggled and dragged Micheal along with her. Some of the neighborhood moms passed out snacks for the kids as they discussed the game afterwards. Although Jane had won like always, Micheal had unknowingly earned some respect for getting second place. The other kids bombarded him with questions as to how he pulled it off. After awhile of chatting and getting caught up on the newest games Micheal headed home.

Pride

After a chaotic month featuring a dramatic fight with drinking and an unpleasant visitor from the past, Jack decided it was time for the monthly ritual to begin. Early in the morning Jack packed his half asleep kids into the back of the car and sipped a large cup of coffee before they headed out. The kids safely in their seats and still in their pajamas, gently fell back to sleep a few minutes into the car ride. It gave Jack sometime with nothing but his thoughts and the road. The hour long drive he took once a month would feel like a drive across the country without being able to turn on the radio. Throughout the drive he took time to reflect on life and he thought about what he was going to do once he arrived. He periodically peeked in the back to check in on Michael and Amy.

As he pulled into the driveway to Gloria's house, his mother. The old woman sprang to life once she saw his car through her window. She scurried outside and Jack gave her a hello. She gave him a quick *"hi Jack"* and walked past him to backseat of the car. She opened the car door carefully and gently woke the kids. *"Good morning angels."* She gently greeted them, and as they woke up smiles plastered on their faces. They went in the house and she started to make breakfast for them. But as they waited at the table she also made sure to tell her audience all the new exciting things this month. *"You're not going to believe it, but the neighbor's granddaughter with the missing cat, the cat was in the house the whole time! They found her Friday. It was just great news but the real kicker was last night's late show I couldn't believe he could possibly....."* she excitedly droned on about everything she could think of while preparing breakfast. Jack got up from the table made his way to his parent's office room. While his eyes were transfixed on the urn in front of him he started to speak, not knowing his mother and the kids had out of curiosity followed him shortly after, they were now his audience.

“Hey dad, I’m sorry for not visiting often….. but I wanted to tell you, that I’ll be able to keep my promise. I’ve worked my ass off trying to make it happen. I finally got control of my booze, I got a pretty decent new job and a pretty good house for myself, life has been great. But I have something now that’s way more important that any of that stuff. I have a son, and a daughter too. I wish you could have met them dad. Micheal is a wonderful kid, he’s so full of life, he’s a natural people person and he would do anything for his sister, and Amy, she loves her art and she’s huge daddy’s girl and there’s nothing that she doesn’t want to learn about. They’re such amazing kids and I’m so grateful for them. I do everything I can to try to keep my promise and give them a good life. I just wish you part of that life too. I wish you could see me now, I wish I could make you proud”

Jack starts to quietly sob. His father’s lifeless office gives no reply to his heartfelt speech. *“Jack?”* his mother called to him. He said nothing but she placed her hand in his shoulder and brought him into a hug to comfort him. *“Well, I for one am proud of you Jack, you’ve accomplished so much and my grand kids are such delightful little angels. Come, out of this depressing office, eat with us.”* The kids just stared, they weren’t sure how to react so they just said nothing. Jack then joined them from breakfast, and he enjoyed a nice day with his family.

Forgiveness

The wrongs that have been done to us afford us the privilege of deciding how to react. We can react with rage, we can react with indifference, or we can react with the desire for peace.

Tonight Jack decided to stomp out a fire before it had any chance to grow. He dropped off Amy and Michel at their grandma’s house for the night and headed out. A dead silent ride later he was there.

The corner diner. He sat down at an empty booth and waited. It was slow at this hour so no matter what happened it might not even bother anyone. The diner was almost as recognizable to him as his own home. This is where his Dad would take him all the time, where he usually grabbed a bite after school and where he’d first taken Maria for a date. So much history in one building, and it was time to add even more to it. He heard her walk in and she sat down in front of him. For the first time in years other then hearing, Jack and Maria were face to face. He began. *“Well, what did you want to tell me, did you want a round two Maria?”* She was already offended right off the bat. *“You know what…”* she sighed *“no”* she stopped her outrage in it’s tracks. *“I want apologize to you. That stupid case was a terrible idea, I’m sorry I put you through that. I had my chance to be a mom and I fucked it up. But I don’t want that to be the future.”* She told him. *“That case was a massive headache Maria”* Jack replied coldly. *“Yeah, It was my stupid parents idea. But you might have already guessed that though.”* she replied. He sighed *“yeah, that sounds like something they’d do, how’d they trick you into going trough with it?”* She looked down in shame and spoke. *“I was in a bad place, these past two years I couldn’t stop thinking about Micheal and Amy. Every day it was like an obsession. Wondering what they look like now, hoping they didn’t hate me. Remembering having them at the hospital. I just wanted a second chance. I didn’t know what to do so I asked my parents and you know how that goes.” “Yeah I know, they got in your head didn’t they?”* he asked her.

“Yeah” tears started to slide down her cheeks as she started to lose composure. *“I’m sorry again Jack.” S*he placed her head on her hands and began to sob. *“I just wanted to know them, I just wanted to be a mother. But I’ve basically abandoned them, I know nothing anything about them and even worse it’s all my fault. What are they like Jack?”* she asked between sobs. *“Well, Micheal is pretty social, pretty hyper, he’s just like me when I was his age. Amy likes her art and music stuff, but she’s a little shy”* Maria looked up at Jack. “*I came here to ask for a second chance, I know it’s pretty late. I know you’ve probably moved on long ago. But I want the chance to be a mother to them, could you ever give me that chance even after all this time?”* For a few seconds they both sat in silence while Jack contemplated the request. *“As much as I can’t stand the sight of you. I don’t see why not. But it’s going to take time. I’m still pretty pissed of about that stupid case. But I don’t think butting heads with you will be good in the long run. It will probably be good for them if have a mother too.”* She meekly replied *“Thank you”* but he had one last addition. *“But keep your crazy parents on a leash.”* She gave a short laugh but agreed. They had a peaceful dinner together and then went their separate ways.

The Stranger.

One night Amy was awake way past her usual bedtime. Typically she’d be sleeping already, just like Micheal, but tonight the sandman seemed a bit too shy to visit Amy tonight. She sat at her desk drawing under her lamp’s dim light. She figured she would probably be able to sleep after finishing her drawing, but the pin drop silence of the room was interrupted by quiet unfamiliar voices downstairs. She put her pencils down and slowly tiptoed to the stairs to investigate. As she gently peeked her head out from the top of the stairs she saw people sitting on the couch in the living room. Jack, Marcus and Jason. But there was two strangers she couldn’t make out. With the dim glow of the TV being the only light source it made it even harder for her. Their voices were alien as well, so that was no help either. She tiptoed out into the living room. Their talking and the TV show they were all engrossed in provided the perfect cover for Amy to glance at the strangers just a little closer. One she could figure out was Jason’s sister, a pretty rare sight for Amy, but the other woman was obscured by the darkness. Amy sat behind the couch and occasionally tried to glance at the stranger from her new hiding spot. But Amy had underestimated how tired she actually was. Slowly Amy drifted off to sleep during her stakeout. Half awake she opened her eyes to find herself closer to the TV. As she sluggishly looked around she found herself laying on her father’s lap. All around her the quiet voices spoke with each other. *“She was behind the couch?”*, *“She needs to go to bed”*, *“She will, she’ll fall back asleep soon, and I’ll put her in bed.”* The glow of the TV and the tranquil atmosphere around her lulled Amy back to sleep. Maybe the sandman wasn’t so shy after all. The little ninja would have to find another mission to complete.

The next morning Jack got a text. *“Thanks for having me over yesterday Jack, it was fun. Hope I didn’t spook Amy. Again, sorry again about that stupid lawsuit. But thanks for giving me a chance anyway. Hope to see you again.”*

The St Patrick’s day incident

Jack never celebrated St Patrick’s with the kids. As much as Jack loved to drink, St Patrick’s day was a reminder of a horrifying encounter. It made him

silent for the entire duration of the day. To him, it was better to just not even acknowledge the holiday and his father. But even after so many years it was still impossible for him to forget the story.

At eight years old Jack started that year's St Patrick's by searching every drawer for something green. This year there was no way he was getting pinched and the green was his protection. His school day went off normally and he avoided the pinches. But now that he was home he had bigger problems. His father loved getting into the holiday spirit, but he could get a little too festive. It wasn't uncommon for his father to drink even more than usual on St Patrick's Day. As he walked through the living room he prepared himself for the barrage of drunken antics typical of the day. But before he could make it into his room he was summoned. *"JACK"* his father called for him. *"Be useful and pass me another round boy"*. Jack sighed and walked into to kitchen to grab the beer but just as he reached the living room the rug caught his shoes and he tripped. The bottle shattered and beer covered Jack, but he thankfully avoided being cut by any glass. An honest mistake, but it was an affront to his father he jumped up off the couch already red in the face. *"YOU DID THAT SHIT ON PURPOSE DIDN'T YOU LITTLE YOU LITTLE ASSHOLE?"* Jack tried to get a word out, but before he could his father slammed his foot into the side of Jack's stomach in anger, knocking the wind out of him. *"STUPID BRAT WASTING MY FUCKING BEERS, HOW IT SO FUCKING DIFFICULT FOR YOU TO NOT FUCK UP A SIMPLE THING? I'll go get them myself, clean this shit up before I get back"* Jack cleaned up the beer and went off to his room to play video games. It was hard to take his mind off the pain of the kick. As he played his game he couldn't stop shaking. He had never been hit before and he couldn't understand why it even happened. But even worse was that the Incident on St. Patrick's day was only the beginning.

Something about his father had changed, and he didn't know whether it was before that day or during. But things only escalated, his once loving and patient father used Jack as a punching bag. Calling him names, destroying his toys and hitting him. Sometimes he left to his uncle's house to get away from his father's anger. But trying to get help was pointless. His uncle never believed what Jack told him about his father abusive habits, but he would always come bail Jack out anyway. If he couldn't take Jack to his house instead, Jack would be stuck home alone with his dad, terrified of what might happen. He was only in the clear when his mom came home from work and dealt with his dad. But as suddenly as it started, it had stopped. Jack's father suddenly stopped and he switched to just isolating himself instead, he stopped caring about Jack altogether as if he'd simply given up on him.

When Jack was in his teens and trying to navigate the chaos of life, his father would rather sit In his room and get drunk rather than be there for Jack. With a mom who worked all the time and a dad who refused to get involved in his life, despite being home all the time, Jack had to figure out life all on his own. By the time Jack became an adult his father was just a stranger. But just when Jack's father finally came around and wanted to mend their strained relationship, it was too late. Things had progressed pretty well at first at it looked like things were really improving. But life had other plans. Only three months after Jack's graduation from collage his father was hit head on by a drunk driver going the wrong way.

This is what would keep Jack paralyzed all St. Patrick's day. It was the thing that kept him quiet and on autopilot the entire day. Remembering and reliving those memories was an annual occurrence Where Jack would be almost catatonic. Like some form of strange ritual. This year, the kids poked and prodded at Jack who barley moved on the couch. *"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy"* Amy repeated as she poked her father aimlessly. Micheal looked closely into Jack's face and made faces and sounds at him to try to get a reaction, but all either of them got was a weak hello.

Stradivari

Amy sat alone in a place she couldn't recognize on small an old fashion arm chair. As she looked around she couldn't make out anything. A gentle dim light was a stranger in the room and it didn't dare to enter past the window. The abyss in front of her glued Amy to her seat. There would be no way she'd risk getting up. But the blackness began a siren's song for her. A massage for the ears that was beautiful, but wept with a melancholic tone. The blackness retreated almost as if prompting Amy to follow. She allowed herself to taken in by the melody and the void was charitable enough to clear the path for her. She slowly walked down the dark hallway until she reached a door. She could hear the song from the other side and now its source was clear. Someone was playing the violin. The violin sang the most heartbreaking song she'd ever heard. It wasn't just sad, it was also angry too, but these two elements harmonized so closely that their voices formed a new one. Much more frustration than any anger she's ever felt and a deeper sadness then she's ever experienced. It clawed at her soul heartlessly, but she couldn't resist opening the door. The song gently drew to a close as she opened the door. The room she now faced looked like a beautifully decorated ballroom that sat vacant for decades. The room was completely dead all except one person. The man standing in the middle of the room looked strange. Amy approached him and his contradictory appearance walked the line of foreign and familiar. She had never seen him but his skin tone matched her father's and his facial features were eerily similar to Micheal's. When she met him face to face she could see his face was pained. He gently placed his violin down, he knelt down and held Amy's hand. He stared into eyes her for a minute and let his tears fall. Finally he spoke up. *"Break the cycle".*Something about this one sentence sent chills through Amy. All the pain from his voice tore into her and before she knew it she was awake and screaming.

In seconds her bedroom lights were on and her brother and father stared at her. Micheal looked like he'd seen a ghost. Jack tried to ask her what was wrong but between the pounding of her heart, heavy breathing and the Man's voice repeating his words in her head, she was too scared to talk. Jack touched her shoulder and called out to her. *"Break the cycle, brake the cycle, brake the cycle"* she quietly repeated. *"What did you say Amy?".* Jack asked her. She snapped out of her trance. *"Break the cycle, that's what he said"* Jack's face dropped and he softly replied *"I think it's time for me to tell you something"*

Jack lead Amy and Micheal to his room, and told them to sit on the bed. They complied and he joined them. He pulled out a photo from his nightstand and showed it to Amy. *"Was this the man you saw?"* he asked her. She recognized the man from her dream immediately and she nodded. *"This man, Is my dad. Your grandfather. The reason you've never met him is… he's not with us*

anymore. One day he was driving over to come see me and he... got into an accident on the way." Jack sighed and gave a defeated look. *"For most of my childhood we never saw eye to eye. Our relationship was never good, but as I got older it started to change, eventually it really did look like he wanted to change, but Just as things where looking better, I lost him."* Jack started to tear up and pulled Amy and Micheal close. *"I just wish he'd been able to meet you two, he really would have loved you."* He couldn't help crying. The thoughts of a reality that was denied to him was too much. One where Amy and Micheal could spend time with their grandfather, one where all the wounds of time could get the chance to heal. This reality was never to be, instead Jack was denied his closure.

Jack sat on the bed and talked with Amy and Micheal for awhile, he answered all their questions about their grandfather and just appreciated the moment. He was able to do something he couldn't with his father. Talk, Really talk. he told them how much he missed his father, he told them all about the rough patches and arguments he had with his dad, he even explained to them what "break the cycle" meant to him. He left nothing unsaid that night and made sure they did the same. With the extra weight off his chest, It was time to embrace whatever came next.

Noid

Maria was one of the lucky people who started out with a relatively privileged life. Her parents weren't millionaires, but they were wealthy enough to retire early and put Maria through collage. She studied hard and eventually started her career as a psychologist. By all standards she had success. She had a decent job, her own house and no debts to pay off. Life should be easy for her with that in mind, but life rarely goes so smoothly.

After a workweek filled with long and busy days, Maria finally had a day off. But as a natural workaholic, she had to be prompted to take a day off by her boss. So now she was in situation she wasn't used to. No work and no plans to do anything for a full day. Outside of work her life was usually uneventful and today was no exception. After waking up Maria remained in bed and stared at the ceiling, it felt weird for her to wake up without an alarm going off. She went to the kitchen to microwave breakfast and then went to sit in front of the TV to eat. Even without a schedule she still managed to put herself on autopilot, she finished her food, did her laundry, and some other cleaning as well. For most of the day she did chores. But all the sudden, there was nothing. Nothing more that she could possibly do. It made her uneasy to have nothing to do but stare at the TV and be alone with her thoughts. But suddenly the distracting noise of the TV was interrupted by an odd noise. She quickly muted the TV and perked up. She scanned the room for anything of the ordinary and suddenly heard the same thing again, a noise that sounded like quiet banging came from outside the house. Her stomach dropped and she tensed up, she carefully walked to the kitchen and slipped one of the sharpest knives out of her drawer. The noise came again and she stared at the front door, her heart raced at the thought of having to fight someone breaking in. For awhile she stood motionless in the kitchen and listened to the sound occasionally come back. Her eyes where glued to the front door now as she didn't dare to leave the kitchen and investigate further. But after waiting and waiting, the tension was too much for her. So she reasoned that it would probably be better to attack first, because at least then she'd have a

fighting chance. She built up her courage and made a mad dash to the door, she jerked it open hard, and with brandishing her weapon of choice her opponent tonight was….. nothing. She stood at the door and watched the wind make the tree in her yard gently tap the side of the house. As she came to her senses she quickly closed the door and prayed that none of neighbors saw her. She did a walk of shame to kitchen to put the knife away and decided it was probably better try to call someone.

She hated talking to her parents these days, so before going to sleep she talked to Jack for a while. Despite them being oil and water, things still went well and Jack officially invited her to properly meet Amy and Michael. The opportunity to see the kids put her mind at ease and she was able to relax her nerves and slept peacefully that night.

----------**April**----------

April fools.

April was the month that changed Jack's life forever. Good and bad events alike had lasting impacts that still play a role in his life years later. He didn't have to wait long either, because change came even on the very first day.

The Friday of April fools day started off pretty normal for the kids. The they went to school, did their homework and then it was time for *"Happy Fridays"* as Jack dubbed it. *"Happy Fridays"* was simply a way to use positive encouragement to get Michael and Amy to behave, and majority of the time it worked out well for them. It usually involved going somewhere they liked to go, like a restaurant they liked or fun place they wanted to go to. Sometimes instead of going somewhere, they got new things, a new toy or some sweet they wanted. This week they wanted to go to their favorite pizza place. So Jack happily obliged. But this week there was a catch. Before opening the door to get to the car, Jack stood at the doorway and looked Amy and Michael dead in the eyes. *"We're gonna get pizza like we usually do there, but I got one thing I need you to know. Your mom is going to join us. I know you guys might be a little mad, and I am too, but give her a chance. You don't have to do anything you don't want to, but you cannot be mean to her okay?"* Amy and Michael looked at each other for a second but then nodded in agreement.

They went off and when they got to the restaurant Maria was waiting for them. They joined her in the booth and she smiled when she saw them. *"Hello Jack, hi Amy, hi Micheal"* she greeted them sweetly. The kids just gave her a soft hello. Jack ordered the food and as they waited for it to arrive it was time to get down to business. Maria finally had her audience and it was time to plead her case to them. *"Hey guys, I'm sorry about the stupid case thing...I don't want to take you away from your dad. I just.... wanted to see you more, and I went about in a dumb way. I'm really sorry. That was really stupid of me, but could you forgive me? You don't have to if you don't want to. It's entirely your choice."* They just looked at her and said nothing for a while. But Micheal finally spoke up *"I guess so, but.... do you hate dad?"* Maria winced at the question *"no no no no, I don't hate him. We.... we just didn't get along for a while is all. He's a good man, but we just.. stopped loving each other at one point".* Amy whispered something into Michael's ear and he repeated it out loud. *"Why did you stop loving dad"* Maria looked caught off guard by the question and stayed silent for a minute, but before she could answer Jack spoke up. *"It was my fault. I didn't*

treat Maria very nice. It was stupid, so I can't blame her for being mad at me. I'm sorry about that" he said looking at Maria. The kids didn't know how to react to everything so they didn't talk much when dinner came. Amy stayed silent but Michael occasionally asked Maria more questions. When the meal was over Maria had one last thing to ask. *"Amy, Michael, I really do love you two, I want you to know that. I haven't been the best mommy, but do you think you could give me a chance?"* There was a pause for second. *"Okay"* Amy responded. But Michael only gave her a dirty look. Amy tapped her brother with her elbow almost as if scolding him. *"Yeah, I guess so"* he halfheartedly responded. Jack had gotten them their favorite desserts as a "*sorry for making the night awkward*" gift and after dinner they headed back home.

That night was the second big domino for many changes, the month had many things in store for them and this was only the first day.

Rage and Rejoice

It's very unlikely for people to change overnight, people are complicated and many factors influence how what decisions they make. But this isn't always the case. Sometimes life forces change to happen much quicker then usual. Whether it be a good or bad event, life often throws out the unexpected. Only a few days into April that unexpected happened.

Wednesday, April 5th 2026. A day that shook a whole town. Little Beaver Elementary was surrounded by an army of police officers, media vans and terrified parents. The police response was lightning fast and they were in the building in less than a minute. They mentally prepared themselves for whatever encounters they would have and they started their room to room search. It didn't take them long to find the cause of the trouble. A middle aged man carried a large hunting rifle. He looked absolutely vile, and had a rage in his eyes unlike anything anyone in the town had seen. He was surrounded in seconds. *"POLICE DEPARTMENT, DROP THE WEAPON" the* officer shouted, and the man gave up quickly. He dropped his weapon and was off in handcuffs with little resistance.

Elsewhere in the school, Amy was under her desk same as the other kids in the classroom. Not a single person dared to make a sound but a knock at the door broke up the silence. *"POLICE DEPARTMENT, DO YOU ANY INJURIES?"* The man behind the door shouted. The teacher was shaken up and carefully made her way to the door. She squeaked out "*no we're all okay here"* she opened the door for the officers and they look around for a minute or two. *"Alright we're clear, I need you all to follow us outside and we'll send you all home".* Amy followed the class out of the room and checked every corner for Michael as she walked. She couldn't find Michael but see did see some other classes and a ton of cops. They were led outside and put on a bus that drove them to another school's gymnasium. She sat on the bleachers but changed seats when she spotted her brother only a few seats away. The whole situation terrified her but being with him eased her nerves slightly. He could see the fear in her eyes and hugged her. *"It's okay, we're okay"* he tried to console her. She didn't say anything in return, but held on to Michael as if she would float away if she let go. He sat and waited with Amy. But they luckily didn't have to wait long to be picked up. They came outside and Maria and Marcus were waiting for them. *"Where's dad?"* Michael asks them. *"Don't worry we called him, he'll meet us at the house"* Maria assured Micheal. The kids got in Marcus's car but Amy couldn't keep it in

anymore. She was hysterical, the fear was just too much and she couldn't help but cry. Maria stopped walking to her car and came back for Amy. *"Shh, you're safe okay?, Michael is here, Marcus is here, I'm here. You'll see daddy soon okay?"* She patted Amy's back and sat with her in the back seat. *"Okay"* Amy whimpered back. Everyone sat for a while in the car trying to comfort Amy. Eventually she calmed down a little and Maria went back to her car. Marcus then drove them home.

At the same time as Little Beaver elementary was being evacuated and police were capturing the crazy man, Jack was at work. Unaware of anything. His phone was not on him because his work required a lot of focus. But as he was working on a Client's tattoo, the TV in the parlor violently yanked his attention away. *"This just in police are looking for a reported active shooter in Little Beaver elementary...."* His heart sank and he quickly put down his tattoo gun and rushed to find his phone. He felt like all the oxygen in his body had left as his heart raced. He picked it up but almost dropped it with how bad his trembling was. Three missed calls, The School, Maria, Marcus. He frantically called The school and badgered them about Amy and Micheal's whereabouts. "*everything is okay, we couldn't get a hold of you so we used the listed emergency contact, all the kids are at the high school next door in the gymnasium so their parents can pick them up. So your emergency contact probably has them right now and thankfully nobody has been reported hurt."* Jack thanked the lady on the phone and sighed, he rushed to his car. He went as fast as he legally could home as was met inside by everybody. He rushed to Amy and Micheal and hugged them. They stayed that way for awhile and when Micheal saw his dad's face he couldn't keep it together just like his sister. They cried together but relaxed when their minds finally registered that they where safe. They sat together on the couch and mentally breathed a sigh of relief. *"Maria, Marcus, thank you for helping out,"* Jack told them. *"No worries, just relax now, you look your going to pass out. Don't pass out, alright?"* Marcus replied. *"Alright, I'll try"* Jack replied. *"I brought food so you don't have to do anything tonight and some treats for the kids"* Maria announced. Jack thanked her and they all took some time to decompress.

Everyone hung out for awhile, the adults watched TV, the kids talked to their grandma and played games and they ended the day with a nice lazy dinner together.

A Miracle had happened on a day could have ended so much worse. Not just for Jack and his family but the entire community. After the dust had settled it was reported the gunman had fired about eight shots at random people. But as if divine intervention, not a single person was killed or even injured. The police had responded too fast for him to continue his rampage.

Solo

The day after the incident at little beaver was perfectly normal, but the family was not. Jack was much more on edge than normal, Maria called out of work, Micheal was mute. and Amy clung to her father all day like a lost puppy. A switch had been flipped and nobody was themselves.

At the end of the day Jack tucked the kids into bed and made his way to his room to sleep. But a few minutes later something called him back. "a*re they safe? are they having trouble sleeping? are they still in the room? is someone*

else in the room? are they alive? Is one of them hurt but can't call out for help?" Jack went back to their room to check on them. There was nothing but two kids who slept peacefully and safe. He walked out, but immediately walked back in *"is something hiding and waiting for me to leave? Is it actually them in their beds?"* he used the dim light of his phone to quietly search the room for an intruder and to verify it was them in their beds. All clear, so he left the room. But he was back again in only a few seconds. *"Was it really them? Did I miss something? Did I check under the desk too? What about their bathroom?"* He went back to check again and still nothing magically appeared to harm Micheal and Amy. Nothing was wrong, everything was perfectly normal, but the barrage of what ifs forced him to repeat his actions over and over again. What if, check on the kids, leave the room, come back. What if, check on the kids, leave the room, come back. What if, check on the on the kids, leave the room, come back. He repeated it obsessively throughout the night and lost hours of sleep. Until one of the "*what ifs"* came through louder then any other. *"What if I died tomorrow and Michael and Amy were forced to be on their own?"* His body went cold at the thought. He sat on the floor in front of the kids' bedroom and just stewed in the horrifying thought. He had already been adjusted to being a single parent. But he couldn't help but think that if anything went wrong with him, Amy and Michael would realistically end up with his mother, but she's isn't getting any younger and she could pass before something were to happen to him. But another interesting thought occurred to him, Maria. Maria was only two years younger than him and seemed genuinely interested in being a mother. She had dropped everything yesterday to be there for the kids without any hesitation, she was there before even he was, even though she didn't have be. She wasn't even an emergency contact like Marcus, but showed up anyways. The selfish, entitled workaholic nutcase he had been at odds with was gone. She really did want to change and she really did care about all three of them, and the day before was the proof.

Jack was able to calm down after a while and finally went to his room to sleep. Because of what happened Wednesday the school would be closed for a few days and he didn't have to take them in the morning. So when he woke up he decided to give Maria a call. *"Maria, let's talk, really talk"*

Change of heart

Jack and Maria finally had a full discussion about Amy and Michael and every little detail of co-parenting. On that day and the following days they discussed and debated on how they could both work together for the kids. They reached a few different agreements that they made official later but there was three major agreement. The first one was a mutual agreement to joint legal custody, which now allowed Maria to play a bigger roles in the kids lives. The second was a solo custody agreement which they decided it would be best if the kids remained living at Jack's house. The third was listing Maria as an emergency contact. It took time to get everything settled and in the days it took to work things out Maria spent more time with Jack and the kids. After a while Jack also agreed to let Maria visit the kids whenever she wished as well.

The kids had mixed reactions to seeing her more than usual. But both kids saw Maria in a different light after the Incident at little beaver. While Amy was neutral to her at first, after the incident Maria's presence made her feel at ease,

just like she did with her father. She started trusting Maria more. But Michael was a little more stubborn, he outright hated her because of the case, but after seeing her comfort his sister during the incident at their school he softened somewhat towards Maria. While he still wasn't fully onboard and didn't talk to her often during those few days, he at least didn't give her the stink eye anymore. The week went by normally as Maria and Jack dotted their Ts and Crossed their Is. By Friday after the week of the incident, everything was all said and done, Maria came to the house to have movie night with Jack and the kids. Things started to improve from that week on and they were starting to become more like a typical nuclear family.

The prude.

One afternoon after work Maria decided to test out her new agreement and she went to go visit the kids. A few days after the agreement Jack had given her a house key for this exact reason. But she opened the door to a quiet house. The TV was on but nobody made even the slightest peep. She walked into living room to find Amy fast asleep along side Jack. They were sleeping peacefully on the couch together. She looked around for Michael but didn't see him. So she figured he must be in his room. She walked up to the room to find Michael glued to his game. He paused his game and turned towards her staring daggers at her as she came in. *"How did YOU get here"* her snapped at her. Taken aback she didn't know to respond, but she thought about how her mother would have responded in this situation. Maria and her mother had butted heads over and over when she was a child, but now she was thirty four and talked to her mother two or three times at most in a given month. Although she was offended, she reasoned that responding with more anger would probably only make things worse. So she tried something else. See made the most cartoony angry face she could muster and said to him *"With my car"*. It was Michael's turn to be caught off guard. He couldn't keep his serious expression up and a grin turned into a laugh. His face softened a bit after Maria's reply and he sighed. She walked over to him and looked over at the game he was playing. *"Knight bash three?"* She asked him. *"Yeah I'm already through half of it"* He replied. *"Looks much more fun than the first"* she said. He paused his game and looked up at her with surprise. *"You played the first one?" H*e asked her. *"Yeah, I used to play it almost everyday when it first came out"* She replied. Pleasantly surprised by what she said, Micheal decided to extend her an olive branch. *"Come play Co-op with me?"* He asked her. She agreed and they sat on Micheal's bed together and shared a moment. They laughed together as Maria tried to figure out how to use the new age controller. For the first time they actually bonded over something. Maria had finally progressed past Michael's ignoring and avoiding her relationship with him. As the two played she couldn't help but hope this would mean maybe he was starting to come around a bit.

Back In January, Maria started getting a feeling she couldn't let go, remorse. She had no relationship with her parents because of how little they had cared for her as a person. They had money and nothing else mattered to them. Her hopes and dreams were jokes to her parents. In their minds everything she loved was stupid and her friends were nothing more than low class trash. In the worst times in her life Maria had no one to turn to and what killed her inside is the realization that she had done the same thing to her own kids. She had

unintentionally treated them like a nuisance, just like her parents had done to her. For Maria, repairing the relationship with her parents seemed next to impossible, but it wasn't too late for her own kids. She still had a chance to make things right, and she was going to take it.

Hair

Despite it's simplicity hair often has more significance then a person may assume. Hair like clothes carries expressions, these expressions may often times tie into a person's identity whether it be cultural based or simply a fashion a choice. For Jack and his children's choice of hairstyles. It's one of the many byproducts of strange choices made by Jack's father.

The family's hair colors are about as diverse as small rural town. Jack's hair is jet black and medium length, and the unsophisticated minimal work put to maintain its form leaves his bangs to dance around giving him an easygoing look. Maria often does her long black-brown hair neatly, not letting a single strand stick out and then she forms it into various styles that speaks to her preference for professionalism. In the color department Jack's color had won out, both Amy and Michael share their father's color. Michael's hair is medium length and goes slightly past his ears, he unintentionally mirrors his father's more relaxed look and he gets a haircut every so often, and Amy's hair is a bush of long thick hair often times lazily jammed into a pony tail and on occasion is changed to a variety of colors with temporary hair dye. While some may find it unusual or ridiculous, the way the kids keep their hair is entirely their choice, Jack adamantly refuses to police what the kids do with their hair and this dates back to his father's approach.

When Jack was a child his father's most pressing concern when it came to these types of things was maintaining an image. The other children at school were all allowed by their parents to wear whatever they pleased, but jack was limited to what "looked professional" to his father. A dreadful boring getup for school that felt as bad as it looked, hardly fair to a child. But when his hair grew longer Jack could experiment, he could try to make his hair look similar to members of his favorite bands, he could try out crazy hairstyles, or he could just do whatever he wanted with it. But it was always short lived. Within days of his hair going past "father approved lengths" he would be back at the barber and shaved down into a humiliating but father approved crew cut. Jack never understood. Why wasn't he allowed to wear normal kids clothes like everyone else? Why did he have to get stupid crew cuts? What did he do to warrant this weird punishment? Even as an adult, Jack's still had no answer. So Jack refused to inflict this weird standard on Amy and Micheal. When Amy wanted to dye her hair for the first time, Jack was a little hesitant due to her age, but he was able to find nontoxic temporary dye hair for when he figured she would eventually not want the color any more, or to make it another color. Micheal never asked his father much about anything hair related, but when it got long enough for it to bother Micheal, he typically offered to take him for a cut. What it may not seems like a big deal, it meant a lot to the kids. Amy and Micheal never had to worry about arbitrary restrictions to how they looked. That small early taste of independence helped give them a lot more confidence that Jack never had at their age.

The Hadal zone

Jack opened his eyes to see nothing, he couldn't see, he couldn't hear and he couldn't feel a single thing. His body was completely weightless and he floated around. But from every direction an immense weight covered every single spot on his body. The only other thing he could feel was a brutal lifeless cold, but it had no good nor evil in it's soul, its indifference to Jack's condition bore no bad faith, yet it continued. But gently one pressure on his body changed, instead of pushing like the others, it pulled. It started a trend and others followed suit. They all started to pull up and after a while the darkness slowly left Jack's vision. He could see creatures move, he could see gentle hints of sunlight and he could see communities go about life. But his ascent continued. The abyss waved goodbye as his vision became crystal clear. He was under the ocean and slowly rising to the surface, despite its power something else had become stronger. This power defied the only beast that could resist the power of the sun. Jack was suddenly above the water and on a boat. He released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He looked around. Everyone was on the boat. His father was showing Micheal how to use a fishing rod, Amy playfully chased Maria around with a fish, and his mother simply stood at the head of the boat and admired the endless plains of sapphire in front of her. The family paused what they were doing to stare at Jack. No one said a word, but their stare was warm and gentle. The world started to fizzle away and Jack finally woke up, He felt pretty good. He began his usual day with confidence.

A mother's truth

Maria found herself in a forest, a calm and gentle place where life sang it's own rhythm of peace. Flora and fauna alike created a city the polar opposite of man. The trees towered into the heavens and dominated the skyline. While she took a minute to admire the world around her, something else caught her attention, a small girl. Maria didn't get a good look at the kid but she thought the kid almost looked like her as a child. The little girl waved her over and started walking just out of Maria's sight. She followed the girl for a while until they both stopped at a river. The kid pointed to a women laying at the very edge of the river. It was difficult to see the women, but the minute Maria turned to ask the child who the woman was the kid vanished. Maria went closer to the river's edge but the woman's odd appearance only created another mystery. She was an old woman in a mask, the mask kept twisting and transforming, going from an angry expression to a guilty one again and again. She held a toy baby in her arms and comforted and apologized to the toy while the mask showed a guilty face. But when the mask showed an angry face she would berate the toy baby in her hands and aggressively throw it around. Maria carefully approached the woman and watched her switch masks. But she was caught. The woman's head snapped to attention towards Maria. The angry mask was on and with one hand she squeezed the toy baby but the other slowly started to reach towards her face. The woman stared directly at Maria as she gripped the mask so hard she nearly dug into her skin. She violently ripped at the mask and screamed in pain as it came off. The old women's breath was heavy and her hair covered her face as she looked at the floor. But she lifted her head up to face Maria and she recognized the woman immediately, it was her mother. Her mother's face was red from removing the mask. She dropped the toy baby and walked up to Maria.

Her real face displayed real guilt this time as she gently caressed Maria's cheek. Everything went black. Maria then noticed the glow of her phone. Four am, she read on it's screen. She was relived to have been dreaming. She went to get a drink of water and then went back to sleep.

A mother's rage.

Sitting aimlessly on an expensive couch was Maria's mother, Mary. While she typically had a laundry list of things she wanted to do everyday in her ivory tower, today she had canceled everything. No golf, no country club, no swimming, no pedicures, and nothing requested from her personal chef. Today she had no desire to indulge herself. She sat frozen and transfixed on the photo in front of her. On her phone screen was a picture of Jack's family. They were all at his mother's house having breakfast together. Jack, his mother, Amy, Michael and even Maria. She was so offended at the sight she obsessed about it all day. She ignored her husband, her housekeepers and even her friends too. Why had her grandchildren and even her own daughter chose a lowlife loser like Jack over her? She furiously paced around the living room and ignored every attempt by others to check in on her. She was a powder keg of pent up anger, but her husband accidentally gave her the needed spark. *"Mary? What's troubling you dear?"* She turned to him but she replied with a death glare instead of words. *"Fuck all of it." S*he said as she walked away. She went to the kitchen and snapped the leg off a wooden chair. Brandishing her new weapon she went to work. Screaming and rampaging through the house. She knocked down paintings, smashed vases and threw her weapon out of a window. Her face had become beet red in all the chaos but when her rampage ended it went back to normal, she sat motionless on the couch. As her husband ended his trail after her, he found Mary in the same catatonic like state as before. *"Honey? what happened?" H*e asked her carefully. *"We lost George, we…lost. All the hard work we put in into that girl and she's abandoned us for that lowlife Jack. Even worse I don't get to see my grandchildren, why has God punished me like this?"* George carefully moved closer, he sat next to Mary and draped his arm over her shoulder. He tried to comfort her, he tried to calm her down, but she was too far gone. She swatted his arms away jumped up off the couch and stormed outside to her car. She ignored anything George said to her and sped off.

Furious pounding at Maria's door interrupted the family's first get together at her house. Maria started to open the door normally but her mother threw it open with all the force she could manage, almost knocking Maria over and barged her way in. She was still seething when she entered and screamed "*WHERE ARE THEY*". But she changed her tune when she saw the scene around her. Jack was there of course but both him and Maria had one of the kids close by as if preparing to defend them from a killer. Amy stood behind Maria and Micheal stood right next to Jack. Mary quickly realized that her grandchildren had fled from her out of fear. She had been humiliated by her own choice. Being so close to Maria, she couldn't help but look her in the eyes. Despite her anger she didn't have the willpower to unleash it on her own child now she stood right in front of her. Mary saw the frightened Amy right behind Maria and noticed how similar the two looked. In her mind she saw Maria as a child again, she was taken back to the moments where she would practice ballet with Maria and she

would happily copy every move shared with her. The memory broke her, she couldn't rage, she could only cry.

The floodgates opened up and Mary was consumed by the guilt and pain. Maria lead her mother to the couch and sat her down. She let her continue her episode in comfort. Jack lead the kids to the kitchen and left Maria and her mother alone. Maria shushed and comforted her mother. Mary with her voice trembling asked *"do you still do ballet darling? You were quite good at it. Do you remember when we used to practice together?". "Yeah, I do. we had a lot of fun"* Maria assured her mother. She rubbed Mary's back and comforted the trembling old woman. Maria disappeared from the room for a minute but returned with a box that she presented to her mother. Mary gently opened the box to see Maria's ballet shoes. A beautiful rose red that reminded her of the pair she had herself when she was in high school. She cracked a smile for the first time all day, even with the tears still running down her cheeks. *"oh darling these are beautiful. Do get time to practice dear?"* She asked. "*Yeah, on occasion. I can be a bit of a workaholic like dad and now I'm more involved with the kids. But I do still practice. Heck, Maybe we'll get lucky and Amy will take an interest too"* Maria replied. Mary gave a sigh. *"I'm sorry about all this Maria. I think old age is finally getting to me. I'm scared, I have many regrets and one day I won't wake up anymore. I'm running out of time. I love you, but it's frustrating seeing you settle for a man like Jack. But now I'm too old to be picky. I always wanted grandchildren and I got them. Now it seems ungrateful to be upset about your choices, instead of just enjoying the gift you've given me and cherish time I have left."* Maria spent some time her mother and sat with her while she began to calm down.

Inside the kitchen Maria's phone rang. But she was busy with her mother. Not thinking jack picked up. *"hello, what's up?"* he asked. *"What? Who the hell are you? Why do you have my daughter's phone?"* The man answered. *"It's jack. Maria is with her mother in the living room."* Jack replied. "*Oh God. Why did you have to pick up out of all people?.Well Jack you might as well make yourself useful and tell me what happened to my wife."*George demanded. *"Okay. We were watching TV and she barged in really mad but then she started crying. So now I'm in the kitchen with the kids and she's in the living room with Maria."* Jack reported back. George gave an exhausted sigh and said *"Alright. I'm already on my way to the house. Try not to fuck anything up in the meantime."* Jack hung up and peeked out into the living room. Mary seemed much more calm so he brought the kids out into the living room with him. *"Amy, Micheal this this is your other grandma"* he told them. They gave each other look but Jack reassured them. *"She's not mean, she's just having a bad day. She wants to meet you"* the pair slowly approached Mary who looked at them like they were a precious treasure. Her face lit up as they got closer. *"I'm sorry for scaring you angels. I didn't mean to." S*he told them. The kids sat for awhile and talked to Mary and the family later met in the kitchen for lunch. Although it wasn't the fancy food she was used to she was okay with it. Mary found herself surprisingly a lot happier then she'd been for awhile spending time with the family. Her daughter was there, her grandchildren were there she had gotten exactly what she wanted. She thought maybe she'd been a little harsh on Jack. It was clear to her that Maria had changed drastically. Typically Maria would go back and forth with

her especially if she came to Maria's house unexpectedly. But even though she acted foolish, Maria had patience with her, a very rare reaction she never got to see from Maria. Mary reasoned that Maria's new family had changed her, and that maybe it wasn't actually so bad to be with Jack, as long as she was happy.

George came into the house and walked into the kitchen. He sat down for a minutes to talk to the family. He introduced himself and talked to Amy and Micheal. He asked them about school, life at home and their father. He checked up on Maria and Mary and had a small bite to eat. George and Mary then excused themselves from the table and started to head out. *"Jack, we need to talk, follow us"* Mary commanded and Jack followed them outside to the front door. Mary and George now stood in front of Jack. *"I apologize for my ghastly behavior today. What I did was unbecoming of me. Even so you were patient and understanding with me even when many people wouldn't have been. Perhaps I was wrong about you. My worries about your influence on my daughter are perhaps unfounded. But listen closely boy. My daughter deserves to be treated right and she deserves a husband. If that's not going to be you then don't waste her time."* Mary told Jack. "*Fair enough, but I also have to decide and do what's best for my kids."* Jack replied*."Very well, but think about what I've told you. Goodbye Jack".*Mary and George got in their cars and left and the family spent the rest of the day at Maria's house.

The approval.

The morning after George and Mary met the kids, the couple sat down for brunch. The tension of the day before had all but vanished. Mary had woken up peacefully and George lost no sleep over the damage to the house. They had finally faced a reality that turned out more pleasant than they had expected. *"Mary, how do you think the kids were? They seemed friendly"* George asked.*"They were pleasant. Well behaved as well. Jack specifically asked them to introduce themselves to me and he didn't have to try hard to convince them. It seems he has no issues at all with them. They looked hesitant to meet me at first, but Jack didn't have to say anything or scold them"* Mary replied. *"Interesting, but do you think now that Maria is back with Jack they'll get Married? Give her the proper family she deserves?"* George replied. Mary sighed *"My guess is as good yours dear, I but I also don't know if Maria herself would want to Marry jack. They've been at odds for a long time and had little contact."* George took a few seconds of silence and a sip of coffee to think about what Mary had said. *"Yeah, that's understandable. I know if I was Jack and Maria's age I'd take time to consider before getting married. But I don't have forever, what if we…. Nudged them a little. Offer them something so Jack doesn't run off again and upset Maria?"* George replied Mary nodded her head in approval *"couldn't hurt to try I suppose"* George and Mary spent their brunch coming up with an offer neither Jack or Maria could refuse to encourage them to get married.

While only a short time ago they despised Jack with a burning passion, their minds had been changed by the events of the day before. The man they hated for being irresponsible and breaking up with Maria many years ago, now

not only had Maria back in his life, but was responsible enough to raise two children by himself. Jack had passed a test for their approval that he didn't even know he had taken.

----------May----------

A Parent's Gift.

The diversity of human intellect is a testament to the intelligence of mankind as a whole. People not only understand that the human mind's capabilities vary in strengths and weaknesses, but they use this awareness to join together and use each other's strengths to benefit everyone. In modern society, if given time, good strategies and proper resources, intellectual weaknesses can be nothing more then a slight inconvenience. While many things can be learned in institutions, life is the most efficient teacher.

As summer break started for the kids Gloria prepared the house for her grandchildren's arrival. Usually she spent some time with them during the year when Jack was busy, but during summer breaks she got see Amy, Micheal and Jack for pretty much the whole week. Jack worked everyday except Wednesdays and the weekends for most of the year, so Gloria would only see them every few weeks. But summer was her personal paradise, for four days of the week she got to spend her time with Amy, Micheal and Jack.

The first day of summer break was no different. Jack dropped the two off at their Grandma's and went off to work. She prepared a big breakfast before they arrived so when they got to her house the sweet smell of pancakes greeted them at the door along with Gloria herself. She greeted them warmly and then they went to eat breakfast. For Micheal, Chocolate chip pancakes with chocolate milk, and for Amy, Strawberry jelly pancakes and apple juice. Both kids got their favorite combo. As the kids dug into their breakfast she flipped the kitchen on TV for them. "*When you're finished come see me in the living room*" she told them. After they were finished they followed their grandma's instructions. In the middle of the living room stood an easel. "*watch closely*" she ordered. On the easel was a canvas covered neatly in cerulean paint. As Gloria's brush caressed the canvas the kids watched curiously as the cerulean became a sky and the sapphire blue of her brush became a sea. Every stroke added another wave, and a great vast ocean came to life in front of their faces. "*Art is the medium that can take us anywhere we please. Where do you want to go? Would you like to show me*?" She handed the kids some colored pencils, crayons and paper. They didn't need her to say anything, Drawing and painting was one of the things Amy and Micheal were always down for. In her mind Amy saw the art on her father's wall and the times when he would be sitting at his desk making tattoo designs. She placed herself in a moment where she sat next to her father and watched him

draw at his desk. Suddenly her arms mimicked his, but they went in her directions. Slowly a place came to life that only she had seen. In the middle of the paper stood a man with a violin, he was alone in a large room with the same expression that bound itself to her memory. Gloria came by with snacks for the kids and admired Micheal's drawing of a beach. But she paused when she saw Amy's. *"Jacob"* Gloria said quietly to herself. But Amy had heard. *"whose Jacob grammy?"* Amy inquired. Caught off guard, Gloria scrambled to find her words and she sighed. She pointed to the man drawn on Amy's paper *"Did you see this in a dream Amy?" S*he asked her. *"Yeah, he was playing the violin, he looked sad though. Maybe I could cheer him up".* Gloria paused for a second and then spoke. "*Did he happen to look like your father?*" Amy turned to her with a surprised look on her face. *"Yeah, how'd you know grammy?".* She gave Amy a smile *"I see him too sometimes dear. But don't worry, he's not sad, and he would be even happier if he knew you'd drawn such a wonderful picture of him"* She placed down a bowl of snacks by Amy's side and the kids continued arts and crafts time.

Later that afternoon Gloria got the second part of summer days she looks forward to, when Jack comes to pickup the kids. Typically when he arrives to her house after work he doesn't go home with the kids right away out of habit, so she gets to see him a lot more then usual. This repeated the first day of summer break too. She prepared lunch before Jack came over and the four sat, ate and relaxed for awhile after he arrived. After taking some time to unwind and talk to his mother, Jack and the kids headed home.

St Nick's gift.

Amy woke one day in a bed she couldn't recognize, the room looked alien but familiar at the same time. All the things she'd put in a room were there, but Michael was not. She got out bed, left the bedroom and walked into a hallway even less familiar. She saw a room with an open door next to hers and peeked in to see a room that looked like a larger version of Michael's side of their bedroom. Not seeing him there she navigated the hallway and went downstairs. The stairs were much lower for a reason she couldn't understand. She stared at it confused and stood at the top frozen, but a voice broke her out of the trance. *"AMY."* A voice yelled from bottom. The boy standing at the bottom was someone she'd never seen, but his voice was unmistakable. It was Micheal, he looked completely different. He was taller, his voice was deeper and he was much older. He waved her over with an expecting look and she followed him to a beautiful dining room. There was a huge Christmas dinner on the table and her family sat together eating and talking. Just like Michael, they too all looked older. Michael sat down at the table joining the family, but Amy stared at the seat setup for her. The scale of everything was off, things looked unusually small and she felt like she was standing on stilts. But when looking at the chair she noticed her body was completely different as well. She was taller, and her body had changed in strange ways she couldn't understand. She took her seat and just spectated the scene around her. Mary and Gloria talked about an old show from the 70s. Maria

jumped back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room with dish after dish and Jack played cards with Micheal at the table until a stern look from George stopped them. All around her life continued on in this weird world. But before she could figure it out the world disappeared as soon at it had appeared.

Again she was in the same bed and the same room she had always known. Micheal was sitting on his bed playing his games muted so it didn't wake her up. As she shuffled around waking up he gave her a good morning. She walked out into the kitchen to grab some breakfast and as she passed the living room she saw Maria and Jack sitting at the dining room table eating breakfast together. They gave her a good morning and she tiredly squeaked one back. After getting her cereal she joined them, and the day began normally. But it would remain anything but.

Quid pro quo

Early in the morning, Maria and Jack were having breakfast together. At this point Maria's visits were very common, almost routine. She came in the morning on Wednesdays and other days she had off, sometimes joining the rest of the family at Gloria's house for lunch. This day was no different and seeing her had become the new normal for the family. Amy sat down to join them and a knock at the front door stole everyone's attention. Jack goes up to answer the door and is surprised to see Maria's parents at the front door. *"Hello Jack, there is something we need to discuss with the two of you. Do you have time?"* George said. Jack nodded and beckoned them to follow him to the dining room table with the Maria and Amy. George sat down, cleared his throat and began to speak. *"Firstly we wanted to apologize if our behavior has been rude towards you Jack. It is evident now that you are no longer the man you were before. You are a completely different person now, and if you're really the man my daughter has chosen, then so be it. My only concern now is her happiness and the prosperity of my grandchildren. So, Mary and I have come to a decision. If the two of you were to marry we will support the wedding 100%. We'll pay for anything Maria wants for her wedding and we'll even put money into a nice house for wherever you all want to live."* Jack and Maria turned to look at each other but said nothing. *"Really think about it, we could set you up in a very nice safe neighborhood with excellent schools for the kids."* Mary added. Maria and Jack were silent for a minute and were looking for their words. Jack turned to face Maria *"I'm not sure what to say. I'm pretty happy to have her back in my life, even if things were rocky at first. But marriage is a big decision. I'm also not sure how she feels about me."* Jack said. *"I guess fine, you've been pretty forgiving to me and my kids are in good hands. Not bad husband material really."* Maria giggled as Jack returned her smile. *"Well, I guess I'll think about it in that case. I'm just not sure about anything right now, but I will think about it."* Jack said *"Yeah, so will I"* Maria said looking at Jack. After addressing the matter of the hour everyone at the table switched to talking about things in life and checking in on each other. Even though she had heard the entire conversation Amy didn't feel like saying anything. As she watched them talk she remembered the dream she had. She felt like she was seeing the Christmas table in her dream all over again. Whatever Maria and Jack would eventually decide to do would be out of Amy's hands, but in her heart Amy hoped that the wedding would happen.

Love's Eternally Sweet Song.

One day as Jack went into work as usual, his attempt to enter the door was met with resistance. The door was locked and he quickly noticed the building was completely empty. He was confused so looked to his phone for any missing calls or texts. Sure enough there was a text from his manager. His manger was the owner of the shop and he sent Jack a text telling him that the store was closed that day due to a family emergency. Jack sighed, he was annoyed he hadn't checked his text before dropping the kids off at his mom's and going to work. Having nothing else to do he simply went home.

As he pulled into his driveway he could see Maria's car parked. It was unusual for her to be there when none was home, but at this point she would typically be there so often that some weeks she'd stay late enough that she ended up sleeping on the couch and then leave in the morning. He entered the living the room and gave her a soft wave. *"Oh hi Jack. I came in to return some toys Micheal left at my house. Wait…. did something happen at work? You're usually there by now"* Maria asked him confused. *"Shops closed for the day, owner has some emergency."* Jack replied. As Maria walked towards the front door she was stopped by his reply, she turned around and asked him. *"So you're just going to do nothing all day?"*. He took a second to think and replied *"Well, I guess I could go trough my dad's vinyl collection and see what's" "That sounds nice actually. Today is my day off, so let's look together"* she replied.
Jack brought the big dusty box to living room and placed it on the coffee table. Inside other then the records themselves, was also his father's player. It was a fairly modern one. As they looked trough the records and albums they talked about the songs and the quality of the discs as they tried to figure out which one to use to test the player. But one particular one caught both their eyes. One much newer, much more familiar. It's cover was a band they both loved in high school. They were surprised a vinyl for the album even existed given that vinyl had already fallen out of favor by the time they were in high school, but they decided to use it to test the player. Jack turned on the player, placed the disk, and carefully lowered the needle, and sure enough the player sang. After they enjoyed a few songs one came up that struck a cord with them. Jack stood up off the couch and held his hand out towards Maria and in a sarcastic tone said *"do you like, uuuhh wanna dance with me or something?"* she took his hand and giggled. They stood together face to face holding hands and began to slowly dance with each other to the song's melody. Maria smiled and said.*"I can't believe you remembered our prom song". "I can't believe that was how I asked you to dance all those years ago"* Jack replied. *"Yeah, and now we're in our 30s and have two kids. Time is weird thing"* She replied. *"Yep. But even after almost twenty years I still can't rid of you"* he joked. She laughed. *"Every time I think it's the last time I'll see you, it doesn't last. I thought it was the last time in middle school, I thought I was the last time in high-school and I was sure when we left each other after collage it would be the last time I'd ever see your face. But you're a boomerang. Somehow I always end up with you anyway. I didn't date anyone after the kids were born. I wanted to try, but I never did. It didn't feel right."* he told her. She blushed and said back to him *"I tried going on a few dates, but I never felt anything. Even though I'd been so pissed at you, I'd still catch myself thinking about our nights at the diner. When we would pass notes in class in high-school and spending time with you after class in collage, relaxing in*

your arms and watching TV with you until I fell asleep. I'd think about those times a lot when I was lonely these past few years." Jacked blushed and replied. *"I remember those times I would get in fights with my dad as a teenager and I'd go visit you. Everything about you made all that anger and pain melt away. I was safe with you, I could tell you anything and you'd never look down on me. I could cry in front of you and you'd simply wipe my tears away with not an ounce of judgment. Even at my lowest when I'd make myself sick drinking like an idiot, you'd still dote over and worry about me. You still invade my mind even though we've been apart for so long. I think about you a lot you know? When you were gone I would still see your face again on Amy and it made me so happy. Happy that my daughter has been blessed to be as beautiful as you are"* Maria blushed at the compliment, she leaned in and kissed Jack on his cheek. *"and I'm so happy my son is a such a sweetheart who cares deeply about others just like his father." Maria said. "I'm sorry I was a no good drunk who tried to run when you gave birth"* Jack told her. *"and I'm sorry I forced you to take care of the kids alone. You really stepped up to the plate for them"* she replied. *"Maybe there's a reason you keep coming back to me. No matter where I go or do in life, somehow I always end up with you again. So let's be different this time. This time I don't want us to break apart. But do you want to?"* Jack asked her. *"No, I don't want to either. I love you, I have forever." she replied.* They drew their faces together and shared a kiss "*and I love you too*" he said to her softly.

For the next few hours they cuddled up together on the couch watching TV like old times. When they went to pickup the kids that day from their grandma's, she nearly drowned herself in tears of joy over Maria and Jack's new announcement to her. *"YOU'RE GOING TO GET MARRIED?"* Gloria yelled excitedly. Despite her age the news gave her the spontaneous energy to getup out of her chair and dance with excitement. The two laughed and answered the torrent of questions Amy and Micheal rapidly fired in their direction.

For most of Jack's life, Maria had always had some part in it and that day he had finally decided that she should be a permanent part of that life. Over the following weeks they announced their plans to Maria's parents as well, who just like Jack's mother, were over the moon upon hearing it. Jack had every member of the family over to his house to witness the proposal and Maria's parents organized a beautiful engagement party for the pair. Their wedding date was officially set for September 10th. Jack and Maria had took her father up on his offer and between the months of May to August they prepared for the wedding and began moving in to a new massive house in a nice neighborhood. Maria sold her old house and the same with Jack. The kids now had their own separate rooms and they went nuts putting up every crazy decoration they could think of. Many things changed very quickly in only a few short months and Jack was close to another one of the most significant events of his life.

Jack and Maria

About a week before the wedding, the family lazed about in the living room of their new house on an uneventful Saturday. The kids got up to mess around and play pretend with some of the unopened boxes, but as soon as they decided who would be the spaceship captain that day, Amy spotted an interesting picture at the corner of her eye. She made her way to box with the picture in it and

Micheal followed his sister closely behind. The picture was in an opened photo album and showed a middle school aged boy standing in a trash can while a girl pushed the can around on its wheels. Micheal and Amy shared a laugh at the photo. *"Is that mom and dad?"* Amy asked her brother. He just shrugged. Amy picked up the album and ran off the living room and Micheal followed. Jack and Maria were half asleep on the couch together when the kids presented them with their finding. Maria took one look at the picture of the boy in the trash can Amy had pointed out and immediately cracked up. "*She found the trash boy photo jack*" she told him tapping his shoulder. With a laugh and a grin Jack covered his face. "*Do you want to tell them babe?*" Jack asked Maria. *"Very well. So, trash boy, was your dad in middle school. The first time I met him I was at lunch and he was being pushed around in a trash can by Marcus and Jason. It fell over scared me half to death and that's how we met. He got in trouble with the teachers though so don't play around in trash cans"* Amy and Micheal laughed at the story but then Maria flipped trough the album and pointed to another picture. This picture showed a teenage jack making a face at the camera. *"This was a few minutes after your dad asked me out for the first time, I hadn't seen in over a year cause he was a grade ahead of me. But he asked the minute he saw me again. It was surprising he didn't forget about me. But that's how we started dating the first time"* the kids scanned their eyes over the book looking at the other photos after her story. As they flipped through the pages Jack pointed out a photo to them. In the photo was a younger Maria in beautiful ruby red dress *"Look at this one, this is what your mom wore to prom. That was one of the best nights of my life. But near the end of prom, your mother accidentally broke one of her heels and BEGGED me to carry her allllll the way back home at the end"* Jack told them. "*and he did actually do it. Oh and show them the diner one"* Maria added. Jack cracked up and flipped a few pages. He pointed to a photo of Maria at the diner. On her face was the same expression she would have had if she'd been served a plate full of bugs. Seeing her expression in the photo, Jack and the kids burst into laughter and through his giggles Jack said. *"Here your mother ordered Eggs Florentine, she wanted to try something she hadn't ordered before. She didn't know what it was, but after one bite, HATED it.". "I still don't think spinach and poached eggs go together"* she added. But as they looked through other photos Maria's cell phone rang and she picked up. *"It's the wedding planner again babe, she needs to talk to us"* Maria and jack went started talking to her and the kids ran off again to play.

With the wedding a week away and unpacking almost finished, free time was uncommon occurrence. Even days off there would eventually something that came up and every member of the family had become worker bees preparing for the wedding. Maria was very often on the phone with the planner and Jack would go over costs with Maria's parents. Micheal and Amy would often practice their roles as ring barer and flower girl. Micheal would practice by running at top speed through the house with a Lego on his pillow and Amy would practice by occasionally running into Micheal's room and tossing fake flower pedals at Micheal as he played video games and chanting *"FLOWER GIRL FLOWER GIRL FLOWER GIRL".*

With all the effort they'd all put in for the wedding and the new house being finally over and done with. The day before the wedding consisted of the

whole family gathered in Jack and Maria's house for a lazy day of takeout, relaxing and the grandparents gushing over the upcoming event.

The Wedding of the Painted Doll.

September 10th arrived for the family and the wedding was now only an hour away, the reception was to be at night at the beach so Jack and Maria prepared at their parents houses.

Maria and Mary were together getting her ready for the ceremony in their house. Mary sobbed tears of joy as she applied makeup onto her daughter. *"Mom, this brand is pretty expensive are you sure that's okay with you?"* Mary simply laughed at the question. *"My baby deserves the best money can buy, and you've been pretty generous towards me too dear"* Maria looked confused at her response. *"I'm no fool Maria, I know I've treated you harshly over the years. I've been selfish, cruel and stubborn, BIG TIME. But even with all my mistakes you still gave me a chance. In my life, right before my eyes you went from a fussy little baby, to a shy and sweet child, to a shy and intelligent teenager and finally to confident and loving adult with kids of her own. All I've wanted ever since you were born was just to see you succeed, I may have gone about it in shitty ways but you've still allowed me to be part of it all. You have good job, a nice big house, two beautiful kids and soon you will have a husband. Money is nice dear, but I couldn't buy what you've given me even if I had more money then God."* Maria blushed with pride but said nothing. After a little while they had finished getting ready and went over to see Amy. For Amy, Mary had an adorable dress set aside for her and instructed the hairstylist she had hired to offer Amy many choices and let her pick out whatever she wanted. As they walked into the room Amy was nowhere to be found but the second Mary turned around Amy stood directly in front of her smiling ear to ear *"DOILOOKGOODGRAMMYMARY"* she rapidly blurted out and Mary jumped. *"Amy dear, you almost gave me a heart attack scaring me like that! But yes sweetie, you look just an angel".* Maria gave Amy a look. *"Shoot. Sorry about that mom, she can be a little mischievous sometimes"* Mary gave Maria a smug expression and laughed. *"It's alright, no harm done. She's just like you Maria. Do you remember when you were her age maybe a year or two older, you'd take a few cans of your father's favorite soda, shake random cans and put them back, so your father would have to play Russian roulette every time he opened a can? Children can surprise you, and you sure surprised me plenty. But it's very interesting Amy feels comfortable enough around us to be herself after only knowing us for a few months. That means you must doing something right. Whatever that something is that I couldn't figure out. Keep doing that. Now, alter time. Let's go"* Mary, Maria and Amy were then picked up and driven to the venue.

At the same time, a little ways away from Mary and Maria was Gloria's house. There Jack, Micheal and Gloria herself also prepared for the event. Micheal was not shy about wanting his hair like his dad and after Jack finished his preparations he carefully styled Micheal's hair the same way. *"It's like looking in a mirror. One that goes back in time"* he joked as he finished helping Micheal. Gloria walked in to check on them. *"Oh Jacob if only you were here to see this"* she said to herself after seeing them. *"What did you say mom?"* Jacked asked. She shook her head *"Don't worry about it dear"* she replied. *"How does he look mom?"* Gloria Smiled in response and looked lovingly at the pair and

sighed. *“He’s very handsome, just like you. If only your father could have been here to see this, he’d be very proud. But I’m still here, so I’M proud of you. My son, getting married, I just can’t believe it. I always had a hunch you’d eventually end up at the alter with that girl. I don’t remember a single week you wouldn’t mention her. You really do love her and I don’t know of many men I ever seen that would carry a girl home from prom or raise her kids themselves. You have become A very wonderful young man and even more so a wonderful father. I couldn’t be more happy if I tried. I love you son. Make a good husband okay? Treat her with respect, be patient with her and give her lots and lots of love”* Jack nodded and gave his mother a long hug and he turned to face Micheal. *“Come on Micheal, Showtime. Let’s go make grandpa proud okay buddy?”* Micheal nodded and they hugged. The families then all headed off to the wedding venue.

A few minutes before the ceremony started, George had one last thing to say to the couple before the wedding. *“Well, the time has come. Today I get to see my daughter married and I have you to thank for it Jack. I always hoped this would be the way things turned out. But the only thing that didn’t turn out how I’d hoped, was that your father has been denied being there for your wedding. A true shame, he was a wonderful man and a good friend of mine I’d known for many years in orchestra even before you were born. With that in mind I want you and Maria to have one our family heirlooms. It’s a faithful copy of Stradivarius violin, your father always spoke of wanting to try one out so perhaps it’s a fitting gift. Welcome to the family Jack, I’m very happy you made the right choice.”* As the sun softly went past the horizon and night fell, Maria and Jack walked down the aisle with their respective parents by their side to the alter, and finally stood face to face. The lights turned off and in it’s place the glow of soft lights of all colors contrasted the Inky black of the night, lighting up the venue and highlighting the couple of the hour. The pastor began his part. *“On this night under the stars and under the lord’s eyes we begin a journey of joining two souls together in faith and love as old as time. Today fate has brought Jack and Maria face to face with each other as they begin a new life together. In their lives that have already been filled with blessings, today they declare before all of you here and before the eyes of God, their eternal love for one another to add one more blessing.”* the pastor nods in Maria’s direction and she begins. *“Jack, I’m not a speech person. But I could easily make a whole presentation on how you’ve always been there for me. Life tested us many times with problem after problem trying to tear us apart. But you refused to give up on me and I refused give up on you. You are the kindest and most loving man I’ve ever met and our kids are living proof of just that. You could calm even the most anxious person and watching you go from a good man to even better one has been an amazing journey, a journey that’d be honored to join you on. I love you, I always will not matter what happens.”* the pastor then nodded to Jack. *“In my life I’ve had a lot of troubles, a lot of unpleasant things a lot of issues that made life very difficult. But life granted me a few very nice gifts for everything It put me through. It gave my mother, it gave me you, it gave me Jason and Marcus, it gave me two wonderful children and now it’s giving an opportunity to spend the rest of my life with the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. You can turn a terrible day into an amazing one and you can stick by anything you’ve set your mind to through thick*

and thin. You've always been one of my biggest supporters even when I've taken that for granted and that's proof of how loving you truly are. I look forward to the life we will build together. I love you Maria, that will never change." the family applauded the speeches and even stick in the mud George dropped the grumpy old man routine and shed a few tears. Down the aisle walked Amy, hacking flower pedals at the audience that rewarded her antics with laughter and she joined the family at the alter when she was done. Next in was Micheal who held the pillow and the ring as carefully as a lit match and slowly made his way to the alter. The pastor began again *"Jack, On this day under the eyes of family, friends and God do you you take Maria as your wife and love her for eternity?". "I do" Jack replied. "Maria, do you vow, under the eyes of family, friends and God to cherish and love Jack till death do you part?" "I do"* Maria replied. *"Then by the power vested in me I now unite these two families as one and pronounce Jack and Maria husband and wife"* Jack slipped the ring on Maria's finger and the family cheered. They later partied the night away on the beach and the next day the new chapter of Jack and Maria's life had officially begun.

The family from then on began the typical suburbanite life, there were good times and bad times and as the years past Jack and Maria were able to learn from the mistakes of their parents. They weren't always perfect parents as no parent is ever given a manual, but Micheal and Amy became well adjusted adults. Amy followed her father's love for the arts and eventually landed a career in an independent animation studio that produced many movies. While Micheal found his calling in his teens and eventually landed a good job as aviation mechanic. They too just like their parents, met their own loves and before Jack and Maria knew it their kids now had kids of their own. Jack not only broke the cycle but created a new one. One where every generation learned from the inevitable mistakes of their parents, one who was willing to forgive the wrongs of their parents, and one who was willing to talk to their children and admit their wrongs so everyone could grow, heal and move on.

Fin

A thank you to my parents, who unintentionally taught me that no parent-child relationship is perfect, that life requires understanding, kindness, and the will to forgive any perceived wrongs. A thank you as well to my late grandfather who also unintentionally taught me that the cycle is an unavoidable part of life that happens with every generation, and we can choose forgiveness.